

Strategy for Community Engagement 2019-2024

Introduction

We want to make the Falkirk Council area the best possible place to live and work with local people to improve our services. We know that the services we provide are better when we listen to the people who use them. We know that we can achieve much more when we work together with local communities to make things change. We regularly ask people for their views in lots of different ways and we often work together with community groups to improve local communities. Now, we want to become even better at involving communities in the decisions that affect their lives and in designing the services that they use.

This strategy will drive change in the way the Council engages with people and communities. This means changing not only the way we take decisions but the way all of our officers and services engage and support people.

This strategy sets out how we will do this over the next five years (2019-2024).

This plan has three main sections:

- **What is community engagement and why is it important?** This explains what it means to get communities involved and why it is a priority for the Council.
- **Principles for community engagement.** These are the standards that we will follow whenever we engage with communities.
- **Priorities for 2019-2021.** These are the things we will do over the next five years to improve how we engage with communities.

What is community engagement and why is it important?

What is community engagement?

Community engagement describes the many ways in which the decisions taken by the Council are done so with the involvement of the communities directly affected. This can mean, for example, involving communities in the development and delivery of services, decisions about the budget, or tackling community issues such as fly tipping.

Why is it important?

It is a statutory requirement:

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 has a specific focus on promoting effective engagement and participation to help communities achieve greater control and influence in the decisions and circumstances that affect their lives. It improves outcomes for communities by improving the process of community planning, ensuring that local service providers work together even more closely with communities to meet the needs of the people who use them.

It also provides new rights for communities, allowing them to take over delivery of services in some circumstances and to request the transfer of land and buildings owned by public bodies, where it can be demonstrated to be in the best interest of the community. The Act applies to both communities of place (for example, neighbourhoods, villages and towns) and communities of interest (for example, the LGBTQ community).

This focus on engaging people in decisions that affect their lives is likely to be further developed under the Local Governance Review. The review was launched jointly by

the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) in December 2017. It aims to ensure local communities have more say about how public services in their area are run.

It brings significant benefits to the Council and communities:

Decision making is strengthened by individual and community involvement. Engaging with people can improve the quality of work undertaken by the Council. Not only do people and communities challenge, strengthen and broaden the decision making process, but services and plans that have been designed from a service user perspective often result in greater impact and relevance.

It helps the Council to demonstrate accountability in a climate of increasing scrutiny:

We spend millions of pounds of public money every year. We need to be open and transparent about what we are spending this money on - and why. Through involving people, we can demonstrate openness, transparency, and accountability to ensure that there is well informed debate and dialogue about future investment.

It makes a positive contribution to society:

By embedding community engagement into our work, we are better able to respond to individual and community needs and issues. We can make a positive contribution to society and develop more effective ways to support communities to make a difference.

Principles for Community Engagement

The principles that we will follow whenever we engage with people are:

Inclusion

We will identify and involve the people and organisations who are affected by, or interested in, the focus of the engagement.

What this means in practice:

- We will actively promote community engagement to people and organisations to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to participate;
- We will not just involve the people and organisations that are easiest, or most convenient, to reach. Rather, we will involve groups that are often too easily ignored due to their age, location, income, education, occupation, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, disability, or religion.

Support

We will identify and seek to overcome any barriers to participation in community engagement.

What this means in practice:

- We will make sure that the way we engage with people is accessible to everyone who wants to get involved;
- We will remove or reduce any practical barriers which make it difficult for people to take part;
- We will make sure events are held in well known community venues which are easy to get to;
- We will only hold events in venues with adequate disabled access;
- We will make sure activities are held at times and dates which work best for everyone who wants to get involved;
- If required, we will provide questionnaires in alternative formats and languages and provide interpreters at events;
- We will use language that can be understood by everyone;
- We will be mindful of any religious or cultural factors which may prevent people from attending events.

Planning

Engagement activities will be well planned and have a clear purpose.

What this means in practice:

- We will make sure a clear and realistic plan is in place before we carry out engagement;
- We will set objectives at the start of the engagement process which will outline desired outcomes;
- We will make sure we have sufficient resources in place to support the planned activity;
- We will only involve people when their contributions will have an impact on decisions to be made. We will not get people involved when decisions have already been taken;
- Where possible, we will make sure we use all available information and data we, and our partners, already hold so that we do not replicate activities or engage too frequently;
- We will make sure the timescales are realistic;
- We will strive to allow at least six weeks when we are asking organisations to respond to a consultation or attend an event and at least three weeks for individuals.

Methods

We will use methods of engagement that are fit for purpose.

What this means in practice:

- We will use the most appropriate method of engagement for each activity;
- We will make sure that the methods used are accessible to everyone who wants to take part;
- We will ask communities for their preferred methods of engagement and use this information when we are planning activities;
- We will tell our colleagues and partners when methods have worked particularly well with different communities so that we can use methods that we know work well;
- Where appropriate, we will use a variety of methods to make sure that a wide range of voices are heard.

- We will evaluate methods and make changes in response to feedback from participants and partners.

Working Together

We will work together with individuals, communities and organisations.

What this means in practice:

- We will move toward involving communities and organisations earlier in the planning process in order to ensure that activities are based on a shared understanding of community needs and issues;
- We will increase opportunities for communities and organisations to co-design services;
- We will provide support to community organisations, including Community Councils, Registered Tenant Organisations and Parent Councils, to help them to organise themselves and represent the views of their local communities;
- We will improve how we work with other public, private and voluntary sector organisations when planning and conducting community engagement;
- We will ensure that people and organisations are valued equally in the engagement process. This requires mutual respect, trust and honesty between all participants, regardless of whether their contributions are based on experience or expertise;
- We will support the people and organisations we collaborate with to develop their skills and confidence.

Communication

We will communicate clearly and regularly with the people, organisations and communities who want to take part in the engagement.

What this means in practice:

- We will give people and organisations all the information they need to get involved;
- Information will be clear and easy to access and understand;
- Where needed, information will be made available in appropriate formats and languages;
- We will be upfront about how much influence the results of the engagement will have over decision making and service redesign;

- We will ask people how they want to receive information about opportunities to get involved and use this information to better promote community engagement;
- We will provide feedback on the results of community engagement, ensuring it represents the full range of views expressed by participants.

Impact

We will demonstrate the impact of the engagement and use what we have learned to improve our approach to involving communities in decision making.

What this means in practice:

- We will measure whether we have met the objectives of the activity at the end of the engagement process;
- We will provide feedback to the public, outlining how their contributions have influenced decisions made by the Council and what has changed or improved as a result;
- The decisions that we make will reflect the views of people and communities who participated. If this does not happen we will explain why;
- Local issues and services will improve as a result of the involvement of communities;
- We will give participants the opportunity to provide feedback;
- We will evaluate what we have done, including the methods used, how well we involved different groups and communities and how effectively we reduced barriers to participation. We will use evaluation findings to improve how we involve communities in future;
- We will monitor how well we are sticking to the principles laid out in this strategy.

We Asked. You Said. We'll Do: Priorities for 2019-2024.

This section sets out our priorities for the next five years. These priorities were primarily identified from the results of two public consultations:

- #itbeginswithus – a questionnaire for 12-25 year olds which ran between 16th March 2018 and 20th April 2018. It asked young people *if* and *how* they want to engage with the Council.
- Communications and Participation Survey 2018 – a questionnaire open to all residents of the Falkirk Council area between 15th August 2018 and 26th September 2018. It asked people how they want to receive news and information from the Council and how they want to have their say in Council decision making.

In total, 920 people gave us their views. We discovered that 97% of people and 82% of young people want to be involved in making decisions that affect them and their local area. However, only 25% of people and 15% of young people have taken part in the Council's community engagement activities. By 2024, we want that figure to be higher.

This is how we'll make it happen.

We will increase the number of people on our People's Panel.

You told us that you want to have your say in a way that is quick and convenient for you. 87% of people and 70% of young people told us that their preferred method of community engagement is through online questionnaires.

We currently send regular online questionnaires to people who are signed up to our People's Panel. The People's Panel is made up of local people who have volunteered to respond to a range of online questionnaires throughout the year. The questionnaires provide us with feedback on Council services, as well as information about the needs of local communities and other issues. This information helps us improve its services and make sure it is meeting the needs of local communities.

Membership of the People's Panel is currently too low. This is because of the introduction of the General Data Protections Regulation (GDPR) in May 2018. GDPR is a regulation in EU law which better protects the data held about people. This meant we had to ask everyone who joined the People's Panel if they still want to be a member. Unfortunately, not everyone replied and we need to invite more people to join the Panel. By 2024, we will increase membership and boast a People's Panel that is representative of local people.

We will achieve this by:

- Relaunching the People's Panel with a far-reaching, online recruitment campaign, with aim to increase membership to 2000 people by 2024;
- Launching a young person's People's Panel with a membership of, at least, 1000 by 2024. The panel will be open to all young people under the age of 25;
- Working with local community organisations to promote the People's Panel to communities and individuals experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage;
- Providing opportunities for people to sign up to the panel at community events or when completing online questionnaires.

We will provide more opportunities for communities to collaborate with us to design Council services.

Co-design is a different approach to designing services in which the Council and the public work in collaboration. Co-design means the Council and the public work together from the very start of the service design process right through to the finished product. This means that the knowledge and experiences of communities and service users are put at the centre of every stage of service design. 54% of people told us they want to be involved in the co-design of Council services. By 2024, we will have moved toward a more collaborative, rather than consultative, approach to community engagement and will offer opportunities for communities to co-design services, where appropriate.

We will achieve this by:

- Supporting staff to develop their skills in delivering collaborative community engagement;
- Supporting communities to develop the skills they need to confidently get involved when opportunities arise to co-design services;
- Ensuring that opportunities for collaboration are identified to support the Councils five year business plan and across all Councils activities – so that this becomes the way we work.

We will make individuals and communities more aware of all the opportunities they have to get involved.

We provide a variety of ways to get involved throughout the year; however, we are not always effectively promoting these opportunities. 47% of people and 56% of young people told us that they do not know how to get involved in community engagement activities. By 2024, we want everyone to know how they can have their say.

We will achieve this by:

- Promoting community engagement using the digital channels of communication you told us you prefer:
 - Falkirk Council Website;
 - Email;
 - Facebook;
 - Twitter.
- Creating a guide to communications to assist employees in the promotion of their community engagement activities;
- Keeping Community Councils, Registered Tenant Organisations and other community groups informed of upcoming activities;
- Encouraging more people to join the People’s Panel and sign up for Falkirk Council News – our new monthly e-newsletter which will launch in mid-2019.

We know that many of these methods of promotion are online and digital. While we want to increase our digital presence, we also need to consider people who are less able to get involved in this way. The Fairer Falkirk Strategy makes a commitment to tackling digital exclusion through:

- Developing a digital inclusion strategy;
- Increasing digital access in communities by providing computer access and digitally upskilling people in the community by providing digital skills for life training.

We will reduce voice poverty.

Voice poverty is when people are unable to influence the decisions that affect their lives and are excluded from the decision making process. It means their voices are not heard, or even *ignored*, by decision makers. We recognise that our approach to community engagement has not always empowered all communities. Often we speak to the communities that are easiest to reach and we know their views are not necessarily representative of the wider community. We need to do more to improve how we involve underrepresented groups, including young people, people with disabilities, the LGBTQ communities, and Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. By 2024, we want to significantly reduce voice poverty.

We will achieve this by:

- Identifying which groups are experiencing voice poverty and building links with individuals and organisations who represent these groups;
- Working in partnership with community groups and organisations that work with groups experiencing voice poverty when we are planning, carrying out and evaluating community engagement activities;
- Moving away from a “one size fits all” approach so that we can design activities that empower everyone in the Falkirk Council area to have their say;
- Launching our young persons People’s Panel to ensure that young people can have their say in decision making.

We will show communities how their contributions make a difference to decision making.

We often ask communities for their views and ideas but we don't always tell them how their contributions have made a difference to decision making or share the results of community engagement. 42% of people told us that they believe community engagement has no impact on decisions made at the Council, and only 37% of young people think their views can influence decision making. By 2024, we want communities to feel confident that their views, ideas and experience are valued in decision making.

We will achieve this by:

- Being honest with communities about the scope of their influence over decision making when inviting them to get involved;
- Providing communities with feedback which outlines how their contributions have influenced decisions made by the Council and what has changed or improved as a result;
- Publishing the results of questionnaires and other activities and events online at <https://say.falkirk.gov.uk>.

We will target our resources where they are needed with the help of local communities.

Locality Planning is a requirement of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 which aims to target specific towns or communities that experience higher levels of deprivation or inequality. We have split the Falkirk Council area into three localities - East, West and Central. We will carry out a public consultation in each locality in order to identify the towns and neighbourhoods in most need of extra resources.

So far, we have carried out consultations in the East and West localities. People in Grangemouth have been invited to take part in a process called Community Action Planning. A Community Action Plan describes what the community needs to improve their area and how this will be achieved.

East Locality	West Locality	Central Locality
Grangemouth Bo'ness & Blackness Upper Braes	Denny, Dunipace & Dennyloanhead Banknock Bonnybridge Larbert / Stenhousemuir Airth & Tryst Carronshore	Falkirk Camelon Lower Braes Hallglen

To create Community Action Plans we will:

- Involve communities in identifying local issues and solutions;
- Co-produce a process that allows our employees to work with those communities to identify gaps in service delivery and determine then how our services can be improved;
- Engage with local community groups and active members of the community that are already working toward improving their own community;
- Work with local people to co-produce a Community Action Plan that will help reduce inequalities and address the concerns of the local community.

We will involve communities in making decisions on how local money is allocated and spent.

Participatory Budgeting (PB) allows communities to have a say in how local money is allocated and spent. There is no one way to carry out PB, but it normally involves communities voting on how to spend part of the Council's budget. The Scottish Government and COSLA have agreed that at least 1% of local authority budgets should be spent using a PB approach by the end of 2021.

We will achieve this by developing our PB approach at the following three levels:

- A grant funded approach which is designed to support community based projects and will use community voting to decide which projects will be funded;
- A place based approach where budgets are set aside for a range of services in a particular geographic area. Community representatives will have a say on how these services should be prioritised and how the budget is spent;
- A mainstream approach where we seek to co-design services with the people who use them. This takes PB beyond making decisions on small grants and existing services and towards directly involving communities in service re-design and, by default, how the service budget is spent.

We will ensure that the views of parents are represented in decisions made about their children's education.

The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 places a responsibility on the Council to improve parental involvement.

We will achieve this by:

- Collaborating with parents, and other relevant people, to update our Parental Involvement and Engagement Strategy;
- Reviewing and improving how we currently communicate with parents;
- Providing employees with training to enhance their knowledge, expertise and confidence in supporting and collaborating with parents;
- Continuing to support and fund Parent Councils and other parent groups, such as the Falkirk Area Parent Forum, and provide more opportunities for these groups to have their say.

We will equip our employees to deliver our new vision for Community Engagement.

We will support employees to make the transition from consultation to collaboration by:

- Promoting this strategy and its principles;
- Supporting informal skill development by sharing experience and good practice. We will actively bring together people from across the Council to share information and resources which will facilitate collaboration;
- Building formal support into training and development plans;
- Build a culture where high quality evaluation is practiced routinely to help employees improve the quality of their work with communities;
- Developing a database of consultations and their results so that data can be more effectively used and shared.